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With device, paralysis proves no barrier to bowling

By Rosalind Jennings

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LEESBURG

Several years ago, it was hard for Bill Miller, 32, to take part in sports. Being paralyzed from the neck down had left him with few options.

"There was nothing I could do recreationally or sports-wise," said the Leesburg resident, who suffered a spinal-cord injury in 1997 when he tripped on an exercise device in his bedroom.

The accident left him with injuries similar to those of the late actor Christopher Reeve, and Miller uses a ventilator to breathe.

He figured there might be a way for him to bowl. Today, at a Lady Lake alley, he bowls with other disabled people using a device he invented with Leesburg engineer Claude Giguere. Called the IKAN Bowler, it's a ramp that fits on a wheelchair and allows the user to send a bowling ball down the lane. It was completed in 2002, and disabled bowlers were soon using it.

"We used to come here [the Lady Lake alley] at night," said Giguere, who has been an engineer since 1960. "We used to test it till 1 or 2 in the morning."

The IKAN's ramp keeps the ball stationary at about waist level until the user moves his wheelchair. Expertise comes with shifting in the chair with just the right timing and force to send the ball on its way.

"If you can safely drive a wheelchair, you can bowl," Giguere said. "If you can move your chair, I can make you bowl."

Miller pilots his wheelchair by blowing into a tube, but those who operate their chairs with joysticks also can use the IKAN Bowler.

Giguere, 71, said he hopes his invention will allow more disabled people to take part in physical activity. "We are trying to get them back in the game of life."

Miller began his bowling experiments with his Fruitland Park friend, Rhonda Reese, now 43. In 1991, Reese also suffered a spinal-cord injury in a car accident, and she's also paralyzed from the neck down.

Miller and Reese started by propping up a basketball in Miller's driveway. They would come up on the ball while in their chairs and run into it with their feet, directing the ball toward some empty bottles. The idea was to knock over the bottles in a game they called "driveway bowling."

It didn't work too well. "We tried something we thought would work in the driveway," Reese said.

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"It wasn't real good because a lot of us [quadriplegics] can't see well down at our feet."

Miller is happy that he was able to help design a device that could be used inside a bowling alley with a real bowling ball.

"Getting inside a bowling alley is a whole lot more fun," Miller said. "I can bowl with able-bodied bowlers or bowlers in a wheelchair."

The IKAN Bowler (www.ikanbowler.com) sells for about \$600. Giguere and Miller co-founded a company to sell the units, and Giguere said they've sold about 100 so far. He has shipped them all over the world; sometimes to parents of disabled children.

Lilian Strandlund of Mount Dora has cerebral palsy and uses the IKAN Bowler on an able-bodied bowling team as well as on a disabled team.

"Her top score was 189," said her friend and able-bodied companion, Ed Sherman, also of Mount Dora. "She beat me. I had 179."

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